

Viet Problem Befell

Johnson Quickly

This is the third of 12 articles excerpted from Lyndon Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point."

By Lyndon Baines Johnson

President Kennedy believed in our nation's commitment to the security of Southeast Asia, a commitment made in the SEATO Treaty and strengthened by his predecessor, President Eisenhower. President Kennedy had explained on many occasions the reasons he took this position. By late 1963 he had sent approximately 16,000 American troops to South Vietnam to make good our SEATO pledge.

My first exposure to details of the problem of Vietnam came forty-eight hours after I had taken the oath of office. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge had flown to Washington a few days earlier for scheduled conferences with President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and other administration officials.

I sent for him and asked him to give me a firsthand account of recent events. I wanted his estimate and felt it was important that he go back to Saigon with a clear understanding of my personal views. We met in my office in the Executive Office Building. Secretaries Rusk and McNamara were there, as well as Under Secretary of State George Ball, CIA Director John McCone and McGeorge Bundy.

LODGE WAS optimistic. He believed the recent change of government in Saigon was an improvement. He was hopeful and expected the new military leaders to speed up their war efforts. He stated that our government had put pressure on the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem to change its course. Those pressures, he admitted, had encouraged the military leaders who carried out the coup on November 1, 1963. However, he said, Diem's brother, Nhu had followed his advice,



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1963's own story

Lodge said, they would still be alive. In his last talk with Diem on the afternoon of November 1, Lodge had offered to help assure the Vietnamese leader's personal safety, but Diem had ignored the offer.

I turned to John McCone and asked what his reports from Saigon in recent days indicated. The CIA director replied that his estimate was much less encouraging. There had been an increase in Viet Cong activity since the coup, including more VC attacks. He had information that the enemy was preparing to exert even more severe pressure.

I told Lodge and the others that I had serious misgivings. Many people were criticizing the removal of Diem and were shocked by his murder.

CONGRESSIONAL demands for our withdrawal from Vietnam were becoming louder and more insistent. I thought we had been mistaken in our failure to support Diem. But all that, I said, was behind us. Now we had to concentrate on accomplishing our goals. We had to help the new government get on its feet and perform effectively.

I told Lodge that I had not been happy with what I had read about our mission's operations in Vietnam earlier in the year. There had been too much internal dissension. I wanted him to develop a strong team; I wanted them to work together; and I wanted the Ambassador to be the sole boss. I assured him of full support in Washington. In the months we sent Lodge a new

deputy, a new CIA chief, a new director of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) operations — and replacements for other key posts in the U.S. Embassy. By midyear Gen. William C. Westmoreland had replaced Gen. Paul Harkins as head of our Military Assistance Command.

In addition to my talk with Ambassador Lodge, I discussed the Honolulu meeting, held just before the assassination, with some of the principal participants — especially Rusk and McNamara — and with Mac Bundy and others. The net result of the Honolulu briefings and discussions was a modestly encouraging assessment of prospects in Vietnam, though Secretaries Rusk and McNamara expressed some reservations.

PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S principal foreign affairs advisers agreed that it was important to underline, especially within government circles, the continuity of policy and direction under the new President. I agreed. It was my first important decision on Vietnam as President, important not because it required any new actions but because it signaled our determination to persevere in the policies and actions in which we were already engaged.

This was the view of Vietnam I received during those first few tense days in office. It was a view shared by the top levels of our mission in Saigon and by my principal advisers in Washington. I had one important reservation about this generally

believed the assassination of President Diem had created more problems for the Vietnamese than it had solved. I saw little evidence that men of experience and ability were available in Vietnam, ready to help lead their country. I was deeply concerned that worse political turmoil might lie ahead in Saigon.

As I dug deeper into the Vietnam situation over the following weeks, I became convinced that the problem was considerably more serious than earlier reports had indicated. Rusk, McNamara, McCone, Bundy and others shared my growing concern. At the beginning of December I read a review of the military situation developed by the State Department's intelligence analysts.

THIS REPORT concluded that the military effort had been deteriorating in important ways for several months. Early in December Ambassador Lodge sent in a detailed study of a key province prepared by one of his field representatives. The document reported that in that northern delta province "the past thirty days have produced . . . a day-by-day increase in Viet Cong influence, military operations, physical control of the countryside, and Communist-controlled combat hamlets."

I believe two things were wrong with the reporting in 1963: an excess of wishful thinking on the part of some official observers and too much uncritical reliance on Vietnamese statistics and information. Many Vietnamese

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